

The Gods 296

Chapter 296: This Is Bad—We've Fallen Into Eposka's Lair!

His voice rose a full octave as he stared at the motionless Hong Lin in utter disbelief, eyes wide.

"I can't be certain whether Eposka is waiting at the other end of the gate. To make sure I'm not caught in a pincer attack, I need to verify your identity!"

"..."

'Verify my ass!'

There wasn't a shred of suspicion in this [Prosperity] Chosen One's eyes—only pure excitement!

Cheng Shi finally understood. She didn't doubt him at all. She just wanted to pry something she wanted to know out of that tongue!

'Fine, fine, fine—just don't trip yourself up in the process.'

Cheng Shi pulled out the tongue with a strange expression and handed it to Hong Lin.

Hong Lin picked up the tongue with mild distaste. After studying it briefly, she found the method of use was surprisingly simple—all one had to do was point the tip at each target in turn, then recite: "I swear upon truth—let lies be devoured!" After that, the questioning could begin.

So she activated the contract, binding both of them within its range, and immediately blurted out her question:

"How exactly did you trick Zhen Yi?!"

"..."

'I knew it. What did I say? The fire of gossip burns equally bright in every single heart.'

Cheng Shi stared at Hong Lin's expectant face, utterly speechless. He deliberated for a moment, then tentatively replied:

"I disguised myself as her... and did some embarrassing things?"

When he finished, the Tongue of Eating Lies continued squirming on Hong Lin's fingertip without the slightest reaction.

"!!!?" Hong Lin was stunned. She'd been certain Cheng Shi would lie, but it turned out to be the truth?

Cheng Shi's face lit up. As expected—an ambiguous truth still counted as truth!

But Hong Lin wasn't about to let it go. She immediately pressed further:

"What embarrassing things did you do?"

Cheng Shi spread his hands: "Sis, that's a second question. The contract's expired. It's my turn to ask you."

"!!!"

'Absolutely not!'

Hong Lin's expression turned deadly serious. She spun on her heel to walk away, but before she'd taken two steps, the tongue apparently decided she was violating the rules. Without hesitation, it wriggled free of her grip, floated into the air, and lashed viciously toward her cheek.

Cheng Shi had been standing with his arms crossed, ready to enjoy the show. But what happened next left him completely dumbfounded.

Hong Lin ducked low, dodging the tongue's slap, and with a roar of "RAWR!" she transformed her right hand into an enormous bear paw and swatted the tongue away with a thunderous crack. The tongue that had been aiming to smack someone's face was sent flying instead.

"Holy crap, you're cheating?!"

Cheng Shi gaped, his forming grin freezing on his face.

But the confrontation between woman and tongue wasn't over. The Tongue of Eating Lies, apparently offended by the indignity, swelled to the size of Hong Lin's bear paw and swung at her cheek once more.

If that blow connected, her head might just fly clean off!

Hong Lin hadn't expected the tongue to be this persistent. Her pupils contracted sharply, fury igniting instantly. She transformed entirely into the Royal Bear Spirit and charged headlong into the tongue.

But in her rage, she forgot one critical detail—they weren't standing on the rotting leaf-covered floor of the Sighing Forest. They were inside the Fog Gate's spatial descent corridor!

The cramped tunnel couldn't possibly contain such an enormous bear. The instant Hong Lin unleashed her earth-shaking roar, the spatial corridor...

Collapsed.

"!!!"

Cheng Shi didn't even have time to curse before chaotic spatial currents swept him up and flung him out with a whoosh. Clutching Amir, he vanished in an instant.

Disappearing alongside them were the relentless tongue and the thoroughly embarrassed giant bear.

"Whooooosh~"

"ROAR!!!"

...

The good news was that within the collapsing space, the three of them (plus the tongue) hadn't ended up too far apart. Under the Desolate Lamp's light, they avoided the worst of the spatial compression.

The bad news was that the corridor between the Fog Gates had been destroyed. They had likely lost their way back to the Mushroom-Footed People's Tribe.

But right now, the two conscious members of the group couldn't afford to think that far ahead. They had to stay alert for any threats that might emerge from this endlessly fragmenting space.

Cheng Shi had it relatively easy—he only needed to watch his surroundings and keep Amir safe. Hong Lin, however, wasn't so fortunate. While the Royal Bear Spirit's body made her impervious to the spatial distortion, that tongue...

Was still relentlessly assaulting her face.

So she was forced to fend off the tongue with one paw while continuously channeling [Prosperity] energy into the Desolate Lamp, ensuring the [Decay] it generated could barely protect the "absurdly fragile" Cheng Shi.

Fortunately, the descent didn't last long. After a few minutes, the space spat all three of them—and the tongue—out onto an open clearing.

"THUD—"

"THUD—"

"Shit..."

Cheng Shi landed on his back first, his spine slamming into the ground with a heavy grunt. But he couldn't afford to dwell on the pain. He sat up immediately and began scanning his surroundings with extreme caution.

What he saw nearly scared him out of his wits.

The place where he'd landed looked nothing like the Sighing Forest. It was more like a clearing that had been bulldozed flat within the forest. There wasn't a single Twisted Night Python in sight. Even the carpet of rotting leaves was gone—he was sitting on solid, packed earth.

But the absence of Twisted Night Pythons didn't mean the area was devoid of other "plants." Across this cleared ground, densely packed and rotting, were... Mushroom-Footed People corpses!

Yes—Mushroom-Footed People corpses!

They'd been planted headfirst into the hard earth. The tangled fungal roots of their inverted feet splayed open, exuding a nauseating stench—each one resembling a "blooming" flower of decay.

And these reeking, putrid blossoms stretched in every direction, together forming a grotesque "flourishing" garden.

Cheng Shi took one look from where he sat and his face turned deathly pale.

He suddenly realized what this place was. He shouted urgently:

"Baldy, watch out! This place seems to be—"

He was about to warn the giant bear nearby that this might be Eposka's personal territory, but he noticed that the bear—who moments ago had been locked in combat with the tongue—was already on her feet, her massive frame coiled and ready, staring straight ahead.

Cheng Shi's heart lurched. He rose and peered past the bear, only to find that the wrinkled, layer-upon-layer rotting tree spirit Eposka was hunched there, one hand pulling a Mushroom-Footed Person's mangled remains from the canopy on its back, the other clutching another corpse while poking a small hole in the ground—then plunging the body in upside-down.

Just like that, another "fresh" flower bloomed in this garden of horrors.

Watching this scene, Hong Lin's expression turned equally grave.

The more bizarre something was, the more dangerous it tended to be. Right now, nobody could say whether Eposka's strength in this unknown territory was still as "ordinary" as it had seemed in the Sighing Forest—or whether it had grown even more powerful.

The thunderous crash of their arrival had naturally drawn Eposka's attention. It slowly turned its head, and there before it stood the [Prosperity] giant bear it had been obsessing over all night.

Eposka's ancient, withered face instantly twisted into a look of frenzied desire.

"...Shit!"

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted violently. He immediately drew his scalpel while kicking the unconscious Amir behind him, and quietly gripped the ring on his finger—charged with energy from his own fright.

Hong Lin reacted even faster. Without looking back, she flung the Tongue of Eating Lies toward him and bellowed:

"Put that tongue away and look after yourself!"

Then with an earthshaking "ROAR!" she charged straight at Eposka.

A deafening crash followed as two colossal beings collided once more. The shockwave rippled outward, sending the "flowers" in the garden swaying wildly, the very ground trembling beneath them.

Cheng Shi's eyes narrowed. He immediately stuffed the struggling tongue into his storage space and began carefully observing the battle while scanning the surroundings for any hidden dangers or unseen allies of Eposka.

After a thorough search, he confirmed there was nothing else here. Only Eposka.

'This garden... what on earth is this place?'

'Eposka's vegetable patch?'

'Is Dizel's husk feeling nostalgic for the days when He planted trees in the rainforest?'

'Planting the Mushroom-Footed People He once sheltered like a flower arrangement—does that help Him relive the good old times?'

'Seriously? Isn't that a bit too twisted?'

'No, wait...'

'Is everyone under [Prosperity] like this?'

'Completely lost their humanity?'

'Oh right—They were never human to begin with.'

But in that case, it seemed Eposka wasn't actually consuming [Prosperity] after all. That meant every hypothesis the players had formed was wrong. Its hunting of the Mushroom-Footed People didn't appear to be on [Prosperity]'s orders.

So then... was the spark of this trial still tied to those Mushroom-Footed People?

Were they supposed to protect those exiled sinners from Eposka's slaughter?

Cheng Shi frowned slightly. Something felt off. The logic didn't quite add up.

Logically, if [Prosperity] were truly such a sentimental god, then the curse He'd bestowed upon Old Cui shouldn't have been so cruel.

So what exactly did He want?

And what was Eposka thinking? What purpose could planting corpses in the ground possibly serve? Could "planting" people in the Sighing Forest somehow accumulate more [Prosperity]?

But there wasn't a trace of [Prosperity] flowing through this entire garden!

Instead, the power of [Decay] surged everywhere, saturating every corner.

This wasn't a garden of [Prosperity] at all—this was a hell of [Decay]!

Cheng Shi's gaze darkened. Idle speculation was pointless. He needed to take advantage of Eposka being fully occupied with Hong Lin to search the surroundings for new clues—something that could help him understand the logic behind Eposka's behavior.

So he crouched low, carefully carrying the unconscious Amir as he began his search.

For a long time he found nothing. It wasn't until he'd circled halfway around the garden and reached Eposka's rear that he finally spotted something conspicuous among the grotesque flora.

A box. A box that clearly didn't belong in the Sighing Forest.

Cheng Shi recognized the design immediately. It was unmistakably the type of box used in the Tower of Logic's various laboratories—the kind meant for storing experiment specimens!

And here, in the depths of the Underground, in this Sighing Forest shrouded by [Decay], sat a box representing [Civilization] and [Truth]!